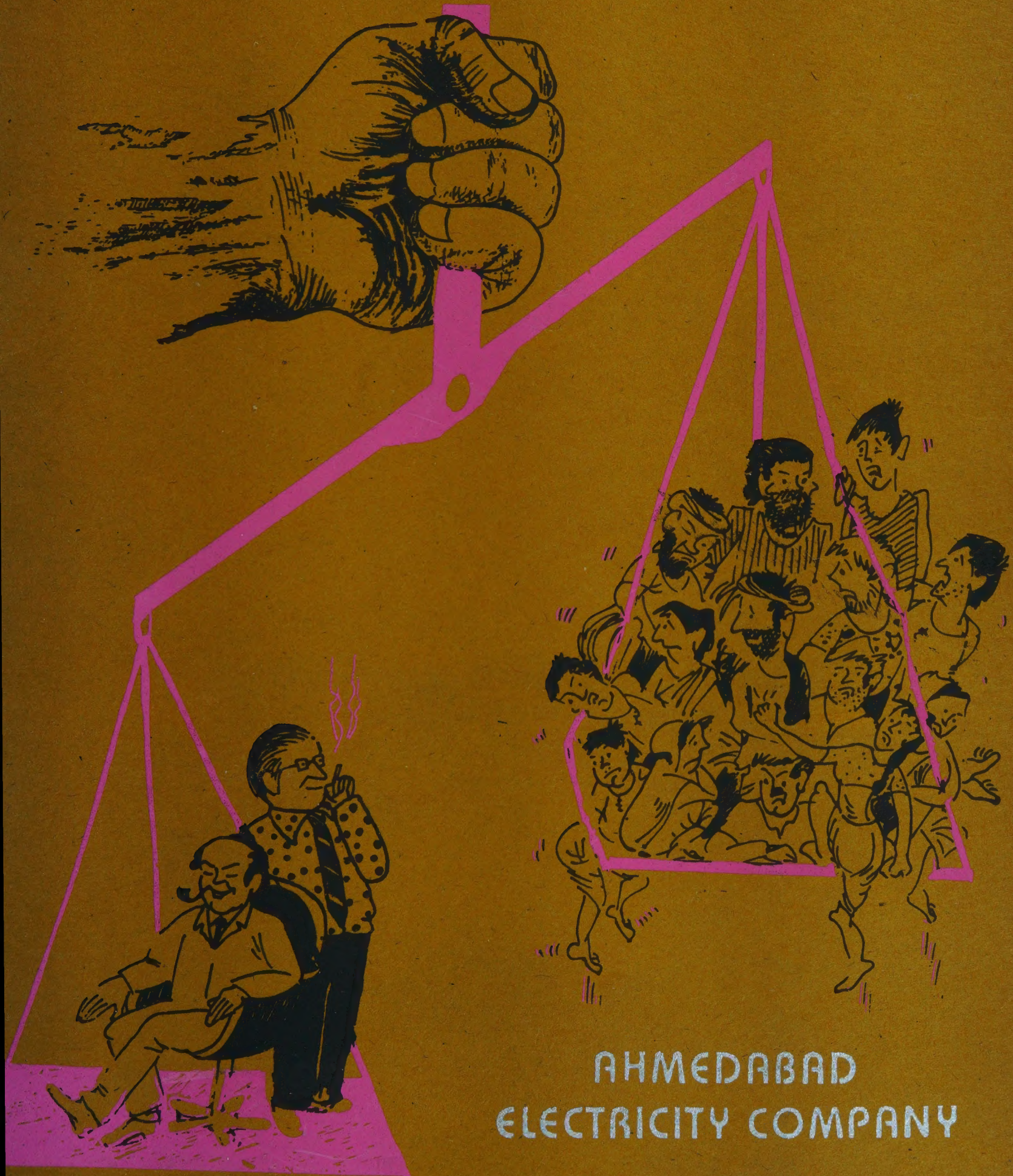


STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE



AHMEDABAD
ELECTRICITY COMPANY

05092

COMMUNITY HEALTH CELL

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INTRODUCTION

As the world moves towards Development and Industrialisation man's inventions started to intervene more and more with nature. Initially his inventions catered to necessity, then to luxuries and eventually to vested interests and profits, where he relentlessly played with nature and exploited his fellow beings. The industrial era led to a great demand for human labour, which was cheap and easily available. This led to tremendous exploitation of the working class, which was overworked, underpaid, neglected and exposed to extremely hazardous conditions.

Thousands of workers die or maimed every year in various accidents that occur at their workplace. Analysis of the workplace accidents, devising ways to prevent them or supplying protective devices cost money and means reducing profit. In this highly competitive economic system, market shares go to those companies that keep their production cost at minimum, which is always at the expense of the workers. If the law had not prescribed minimum standard of safety, economic forces would drive the employers to spend nothing at all for the workers safety and the maiming and deaths of workers would have risen to calamitous levels.

Inspite of the worldwide ban, we continue to produce and consume some of the deadliest pesticides and insecticides (also known as dirty dozen). We not only

produce, export and consume some of the deadliest commodities but also propagate them to be "safe" for our monetary gains and therefore misinform the public.

Many of the workers are no longer powerless onlookers but have formed unions and collectively try and bring change at their workplace by fighting for their basic human rights.

It is to these workers that we dedicate our series: "**The struggle for Justice**" so that they realise that their "issue" is not theirs alone but of thousands of other workers working in various industries all over the world. This is an attempt to make them aware of their rights not just as workers but as human beings and make them confident to take steps to change their existing conditions.

In putting forward the workers plight and their helplessness in bringing concrete and permanent change in their lives, the book hopes to bring about a general awareness in the spark of knowledge shall lead to support of the workers struggle.

Lastly, the book aspires to reach through to the management in making them realise the existing conditions and mobilize them to create a healthy and hazards free workplace.

This booklet deals with the struggle of the workers in the electricity company, where the working conditions were worst and the many workers were losing their life. The reason of their deaths were neither explained to the workers nor recorded. A group of workers struggled for the making their workplace better. They exercised all the democratic and legal methods, like strike and activating safety committee. They not only suggested changes but took many actions by themselves. This story is a example of the workers initiative through their participation in safety and health affairs at the workplace. The booklet is written by Ragunath Manwar, who took part in all the initiatives actively.

AHMEDABAD ELECTRICITY COMPANY

My name is Ragunath Manwar. I work with Ahmedabad Electricity Company. I joined this company in year 1966. My first job was in the workshop. As I was not getting enough overtime in this department, so in year 1969, I took transfer to Boiler Maintenance Department. Although in this boiler maintenance department I was able to get more overtime but the working condition here was very bad. The shopfloor was full of coal gas and fumes and one could never figure out, whether it was only carbon monoxide or something else. Along with this was I was also exposed to tremendous amount of dust, heat and noise. Accidents and injuries were also very often in this department. I even started repenting my decision and thought of going back to the workshop, which was comparatively better.



But I thought about colleagues also, who were also working in this same hazardous atmosphere. Two of workers, Dawood and Lobo had died during this period. They were hardly in their early forties, and too young to die. When I inquired about the history of deaths in that department from my colleagues, I came to know that about 14 workers, who have died in the past. No workers was able to give any information about the cause of their demise. Only thing I could find out was the year of their death. So, when I checked from the records of the office, I found that from 1964 to 1974 no investigation was ever made regarding the reasons of these deaths, and they also had only time and year in their records. But their list had total number of 17 deceased persons. From further inquiry, I came to know that most of them were victims of cancer and asthma and had joined this company in their early twenties. As I had also started my working life at the same age, I realised that if situation does not improves my number will also come after two decades. And the fact was that no change was taking place in the working conditions. At that time was also in union. But when I discussed with the other union members about the hazardous working conditions in my department and invited their suggestions, they replied back that the boiler department gets the maximum maintenance allowance. As it was heavy and hazardous duty workers were getting 40 paise per day. I thought death cannot be stopped with such allowances and in any case what is the worth of 40 paise. This was the year 1974. I was thinking what to do, but knew

nothing about the technicalities of the subject. At that time we used to have worker education classes in the company. I was also told to attend one. In worker education class they teach us Factory Act, Provident Fund Act, Gratuity Act, etc. There was also a topic on "Health & Safety". In that the teacher told us if while working you notice a pothole at shopfloor, then you must inform your supervisor for its leveling. He taught us several such things about safety, I asked him, "all this about safety is fine, but what about injury and diseases such as `cancer or heart problems and hypertension. We know nothing about them". He advised us to contact National Institute of Occupational Health (NIOH), Ahmedabad, for detail information, because he also did not knew much about it.

This class took place in the year 1979. We decided to find out all the information from NIOH. One of my friend 'Jani' was working as laboratory technician in the NIOH. He got us appointment to meet Dr. D.J.Parikh. We discussed about the health conditions prevalent in the power house and requested for Dr. Parikh's suggestions, he advised that we should ask our company to write to NIOH officially and then they can conduct survey not only of our company but also of the other neighboring companies. We were wondering about the ways and means to request company officials to write to NIOH. The department representative and the general secretary of the union expressed his inability to understand the technical

issue and some of them even said company cannot do all this. One of my friend, Mr. Solanki, who was an executive member of the union said, "if you are really serious then you have to join the union. Then only your voice will be heard other wise no one will take heed of you".

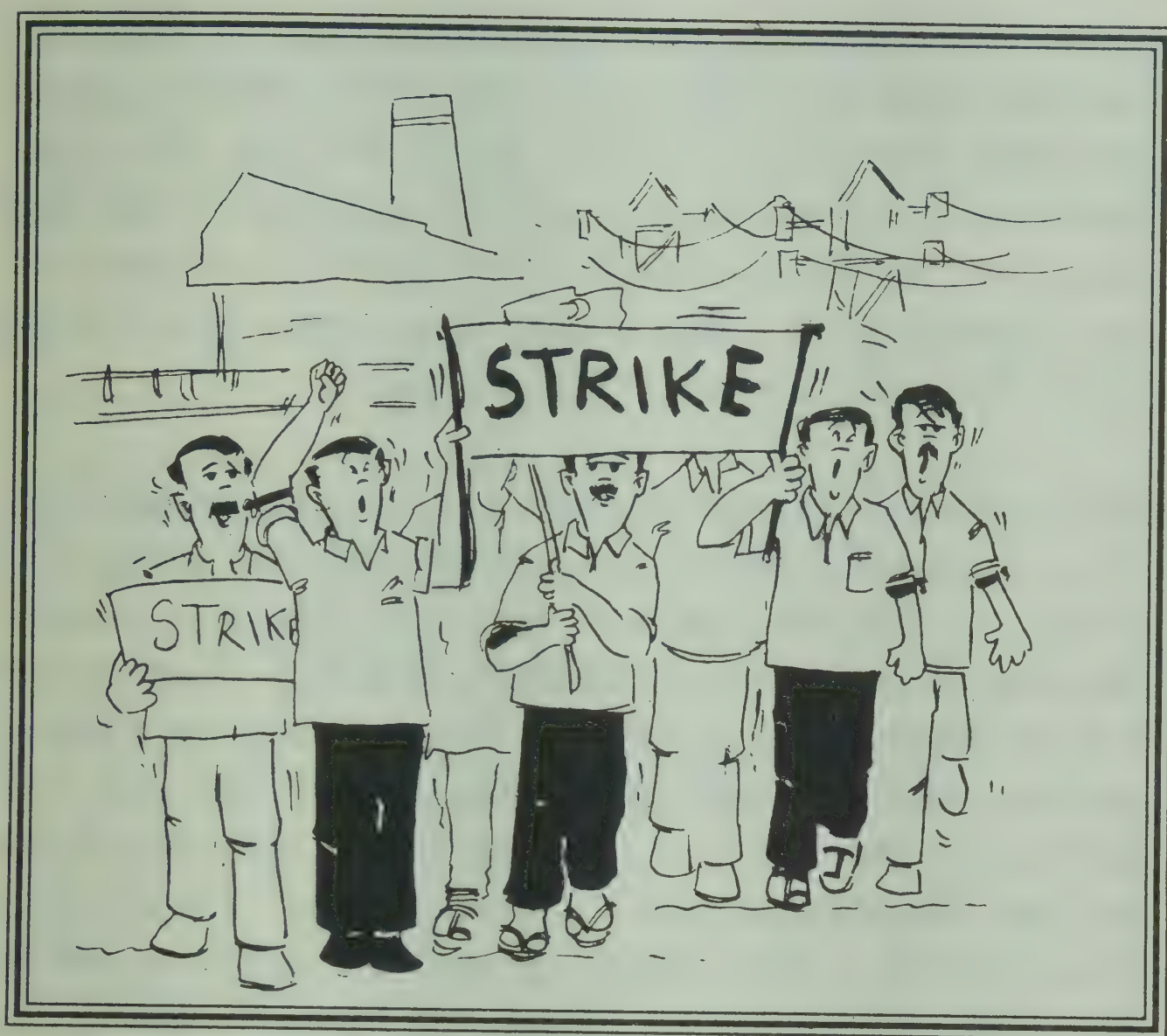
At that time we had Hind Mazdoor Sabha as our union. I decided to join the union. We called the meeting of the workers of our department, and asked them to elect me as Department Representative, if they want us to try to solve this problem. My departmental colleagues supported me. It was the year 1979, that I was elected department representative in my union. I presented the demand of my department in the union. Since union was not much aware about Occupational Health & Safety, they said let us first demand for promotion. So we took the demand of promotion. Then we took up the problem of working hours. We had to work from seven in the morning to five in the evening. Workers of my department said our working hours should become similar to Ahmedabad Textile Industry, where they work from 7.30 in the morning to 3.30 in the evening. These long working hours should be stopped. Due to these long working hours we were facing the problems, such as we could not take advantage of ESI Hospital as it closes at 6.00 in the evening. So we picked up this issue. we first tackled the issue of promotion and then the issue of timing, occupational health & safety was the third issue which we had picked up. In first

two issues we got some success, we were able to get promotions also. All this gave some amount of publicity to me. People started recognising my good work, and demanded that I should be transferred to office work. But I was thinking about how to start work on occupational health and safety.

I called a departmental meeting and decided to build pressure on occupational health and safety issue. We told the workers that 17 people have already died and we pasted the list of dead on the wall of department. This developed the interest of the people in the issue. We educated the workers about the problem of occupational health. We asked them to support us even if we have to fight till Delhi. Then we informed the factory inspector about the problem of pollution at work place. We requested him to come for inspection to which he responded positively. But when he saw the problem he expressed his inability to monitor the workplace due non availability of the equipments. He advised us to inform NIOH. But we told him NIOH can not do anything. It is only you who can sit with the company and do something about this problem. We told him that if you initiate then we will also join you in discussions with company management. But he didn't do anything significant. Then we decided to start with a small problem in this area. We decided to pickup the issue of Boiler cleaning. It was a sunday, when we were cleaning the boiler. There was a lot of dust. While we were cleaning the boiler we were asked do the maintenance

work also. We refused to do that, and walked into our chief executive officer's room. We were totally covered with dust. All together we were 200 people, all looking like ghosts. This made our chief realize that the condition in boiler was really bad. He ordered that any maintenance job should be done only after cleaning. So this was our first small victory. But this did not reduce the dust level. So we thought what to do next. We decided to prepare a memorandum for the management, raising the issue of O.H. We gave detail history of those 17 worker who had died and asked the management to organise a meeting with the union in next 15-20 days. We sent copies of the memorandum to Factory Management, Health Minister, Central Labour Minister etc. We did not get any reply from any where. 15-20 days passed just like that. When we called the department meeting the workers and said there is no support for our demand. Union and workers of other department did not give us any support. Since this was the problem of boiler maintenance workers, hence workers from workshop, turbines, etc. said they are not interested in this issue.

No body was willing to support us or go on strike on this issue. So we did not know what to do in this situation where no one was with us. We had given this memorandum on August.29, 1980. So we wrote to again saying, on Nov.5, 1980 is the Diwali day and if nothing is done for our demand then on that Diwali day three of us will sit on indefinite hunger



strike at the company gate. You may do what ever you may feel like". We gave the copies of this to almost every body, to Factory Inspector, Central Labour Minister, Indira Gandhi (Prime Minister), Gyani Jail Singh (President of India), etc. but nothing positive happened.

We also informed our union's general secretary and he called the meeting of executive council. We requested that we should be allowed to sit for hunger strike. This hunger strike will show that we are serious about the job. So we sat for hunger strike. We were all five people. When we sat for hunger strike that

was Diwali day, management had announced maintenance shut down for four days. Management thought the maintenance work will be effected, because our department workers were adamant that whether the maintenance takes place or not we will not attend to it. On Diwali day apart from us the other 232 workers also did not eat.

Management thought Diwali is going to be spoiled. They discussed about our action with the union and called up Shri Natwar Lal, who was the then Labour Minister and also the president of H.M.S. They asked him to resolve this problem. Natwar Lal ji said these workers are not asking for any money but are only asking for the medical checkup of the workers of the Boiler Maintenance and Boiler Operation Department. " This check-up will be done by NIOH, you (the management) does not have to spent any money, so what is the problem. You write on a piece of paper that we accept your demand; that is all what is needed". So our demand was accepted. On November 6th company wrote to NIOH to conduct the medical survey. After this letter Dr. Chatterji of NIOH informed us that they are going to start doing this survey. So this was our major win. NIOH asked us to give them some time. We thought since company has accepted it so let us give NIOH some time, in any case these things don't get done overnight. Dr. Chatterji and his team came and did testing for two days. Two days were spent but in those two days company did not do any thing to reduce the problem

of dust and other hazards. NIOH also studied the work place and put a notice with the instruction that things will not be removed at least for two days. They also did control group comparisons.

NIOH team said that they will take few people from boiler section and few people from turbines and other department, and in the group of non exposed worker (controlled group) they will cover workers involved in gardening, peons etc. It will be only after comparing people of exposed, semi exposed and unexposed group they will learn about the reality. We asked them to first do the test of workers of our department to which management also agreed. So the check-up started. It took them about a month to complete the survey, i.e. from Nov. 12 to Dec.12, 1981. The total number of workers they studied were 496 and out of this 309 were from exposed group. These workers were from Boiler and operation section. Other workers were from semi-exposed and unexposed group. The report of this study was given after two years (1983). It was because Dr. Kaur of NIOH has resigned immediately after the study and went to Calcutta, while Dr. Chatterji was out of the country for most of the time during that period. Because of all this we lost a lot of precious time. The study was done in the year of 1981 and the report came in 1983. Report disclosed that many workers had problems of cough, breathlessness, chest pain, tiredness and headache. Many of them were found to be underweight. NIOH recommended that before

appointing anyone in the boiler section there should be a compulsory medical check-up with X-ray for diagnosis of lung diseases. Second recommendation was that after every 3-6 months there should be a periodical medical check up and record of every worker should be maintained properly.

They also said that workers working in Boiler department, who are suffering with certain diseases should be transferred to less hazardous departments. The fifth recommendation was about the training of the doctor who conducts the medical check-ups. The sixth recommendation was that the coal bought for boiler should be of a better quality, which gives less ash and has less dust. After nationalization the company had started buying coal with high sulphur content which produces a lot of ash. The NIOH recommended the coal samples should be tested in the laboratory before placing the order. The seventh and last recommendation was to buy few books for the library. In their environmental engineering control, they suggested that to stop the dust from flying in boiler section there should be a barrier built of jute. Similarly jute barriers can also be used to stop the leakage of coal dust and ash. NIOH also suggested that advances vacuum cleaning system must be purchased from America for the use. As far as the recommendation for personal protective equipments were concerned NIOH recommended that those workers who work in front of the boiler should be given safety shoes, helmets and aprons. Although we use

to get safety shoes earlier also but its quality was not good. Cotton instead of terricot was recommended as working dress material for workers of boiler section, as this material helps in absorbing the sweat.

With these two reports in hand we called the meeting of the union for implementation. During our meeting with the management, the management suggested that they will increase our allowance and give us milk but will not implement the recommendations of NIOH. I responded that people first of all will not drink milk and they will take it home as workers are always short of money. However, even if they drink it, milk does not cure the problems caused by pollution. Hence we should first go for engineering control and then for medical checkup. But the other members of the union created the problem. They said that if we agree for milk and allowance, the other department workers may also get this benefit, in this manner every body will benefit.

Hence, worker of other department started putting pressure on us. In this controversy about a year passed away without any progress. Meanwhile in year 1983, I got elected for vice presidentship of the union, which made me to look after the interests of the whole Sabarmati Thermal Power Station and not restricting only to Boiler department. If I take interest in only the affair of boiler department then I could have been accused of partiality. The boiler had 232

workers and operations had 206 workers, turbine had 182, electric had 75 and coal yard had 182 to 185 workers. Some how on the issue of allowance and implementation of NIOH recommendations, there came up a lot of interdepartmental problems. Then as a vice president, I decided to write to factory inspector to get his help for implementation of NIOH recommendations but nothing happened.

During 1983-84, we had filed a petition in the High Court bringing to their notice the severity of health and occupational hazards in our company. The court of Gujarat had directed the company to start a hygiene department within a period of two years. Which meant that we had to wait for a another period of two years. Meanwhile, the union elections were announced, I also contested for the post of the union president in the elections. I was hopeful that if elected as the union president, I will be able to work more to safe-guard the health of my fellow workers. Any way, I lost the election, but not my courage or determination.

Meanwhile, Dr. Mishra, a very enthusiastic person, was appointed as a consultant to our company. Some times he would climb upto drum level which is around 80 feet above the ground. Sometimes even the Managing Director would come for a round, giving an opportunity to exchange a few words with him. Once while talking to Dr. Mishra, I pointed out that there is a lot of noise in the staff canteen due to pulling of



chairs and tables. After long hours in the factory we go to the canteen to escape from all the noise and disturbance, and there also we encounter the same noise. I requested him to do some thing about it. He immediately took action. He got rubber flooring installed in the canteen and put some plants, etc. in the canteen. The noise was reduced and the presence of the plants created a pleasant environment. This gesture was really encouraging, there was some one in the management, who was ready to listen to our problems and act on them. Now there was some hope. We felt that if we take a proper initiatives some result would certainly emerge. Instead of preaching us that 'Don't pull chairs', he had acted and solved our problem. This was very encouraging for us.

After the writ petition in the High Court, a doctor with expertise in occupational health hazards was appointed. Policies regarding provision of safety equipments were also changed. Earlier, the equipments were given to us after a fixed interval of time, now they were given to us, whenever we rejected them. For example, while working in the boilers we needed aprons and hand gloves. Or, while working in the water fetching unit, we required rain-suits. These were given to us. After that regular medical check-up also started. Some progress was being made, but the heat and dust and noise of the plant were the same.

Those were the days of the summer and we had to work on the drumwell. The outside temperature was 45-46 centigrade and the heat of the boiler was adding to our discomfort. The heat and perspiration use to wear us down very fast. One day, Dr. Mishra came to the place where we were working. I told him, 'Sir, what would be happening to our bodies in this heat?'. He responded by saying, "yes, there is a problem, but this is a technical problem and I am not an expert on technical issues, you yourself should think of a solution legging that had come out. If the legging was intact we would experience less heat". I noticed that the boiler drum had no ladder. So the workers had to put their feet on the pipes, causing damage to its legging. The original design of the boiler contains a ladder, but while the shutdown work is done engineers cut this ladder loose for their

convenience. Even after the work completed they do not rejoin the ladder and forgot about it. I was thinking about all this, was also thinking of pointing out to the supervisor that ladders should be rejoined. I could recollect all the accidents that had taken place because the ladder had been removed.

Many ideas were flashing in my mind, Dr. Mishra was still around. He continued, "you don't work properly. If you do a job properly you will not need to repeat it again and again...". With these words he left, leaving me disturbed. What he said was true. We should accomplish the task perfectly so that we don't have to repeat it time and again. I discussed my ideas with co-workers. They were also interested. We applied our collective minds to the problem. We discussed the whistle and coalfeeder. We separated the incidents of maintenance and running defects, we discussed the numbers and cases of each incident.

We approached our superiors with some requests. They suggested that we should start a 'quality circle'. We were also interested. When Shri Udipa, Executive Director of Bharat Heavy Electrical Limited, (BHEL), was invited to Ahmedabad and we had a meeting with him. He gave us some more information regarding the quality circle and taught us the techniques of information gathering and analysis. After that the AEC provided us with some space and we held weekly meetings.

Our main problems was that we had to spend too many hours tolling in the heat, dust and gases of the plant. Work related to whistle , burner , stoker were of this kind, and specially while working on the whistle we had greatest number of problems.

The whistle is used for high-level alarm. This whistle is placed on the drum, joints of which need treatment repairs. The plant has eight whistles and at least one would be always in need of repairs. In case of any fault the operational state, we had to isolate the whistle and climb up to repair it. This was exposing us to the oppressive heat and dust of the boiler. We have to open the joints of the whistle and replace them with new ones but we would never bother about the size of the Gasket or of other technical details. This came out during our discussions. So we studied the original design of the whistle. While repairing the whistle we have to try joints which did not fit properly and in that case we were forced to carry out another round of repairs. While studying the original design of the whistle, my co-worker K.M. Mistry had an idea. He suggested that we should make some modifications in the original design. And if these modifications are successful we would not need to try out size locknut in the needle of the whistle. We got the necessary approval. And now things were so easy we could repair of whistle in only five to ten minutes. Moreover what was a daily routine now required repairs only after five-six months. The workers also did not have

to suffer the heat and dust everyday. This success inspired us. Earlier there was not structure with which we could climb upto the drum level, Hasman Shirke and I suggested that we should build a permanent platform. Once our suggestion was implemented, the problem of insulation coming out was solved automatically, we could also reduce the heatloss. Due to all these not only the productivity increased but workers were relieved of the heat which they felt on their legs and midriff. We could now work with much less discomfort.

The next important problem was that of noise. The machines, fans and motors were the source of deafening noise. The noise created by the numerous steam leakages compounded the problem. There were hundreds of steam valves and the noise and heat made this job very tedious. We discussed this with the senior maintenance Engineer, Shri M.B. Desai, who suggested that we should get superior quality packings. We procured the best quality glands made from graphite with help of 'BHEL'. We experimented this gland on the valve of the super-heater. The experiment was successful, so we replaced all the glands with these superior quality ones. The problem of steam leakages went down and so did the noise with it. The running defects were much less now reducing the work load of the workers. Something which we had to do every 3-4 days, now was reduced to once a year or year and a half.

After this success, we applied ourselves to the problem of coalsuit pipes which were getting punctured frequently. These pipes are made through casting. From the punctured holes coal dust would come out causing lot of pollution. To stop this leakage we used to weld a M.S. metal piece on the pipes. This was not at all effective, a slight nudge would cause the welding to come apart. The repair and maintenance had to be carried out every 10-15 days, on top of all these the repairs had to be done when the plant was running, therefore the workers had to suffer the unbearable heat and coaldust. There was also the constant danger of the worker getting burns. If none of these things, we had to replaced the pipe with a new one which meant on expenditure of 52,000 rupees. Therefore, Pratapji and I suggested that instead of welding we should bolt a patch on the puncture. Our suggestion was accepted and the problem was solved. Instead of 10-15 days this patch lasts for more than two years. The workers were relieved of the unpleasant task for at least two years.

Another problem area was our boiler building. It was like a huge container, totally sealed from all sides and with no entry points for sun light or air. So all the dust and heat from the boiler gets collected in the building itself, which would get into the lungs of the workers. Every time we had to do some repairs we were forced to take long extension cords with us, we would attach electric bulbs to it and then work, because other wise we would not be in a position to

see the parts. Central Labour Institute had suggested that we remove a part of the building, making it possible to have some light and air. The management had turned down this suggestion. Shri Mistry and I took up this matter in our quality circle. We saw that the wind direction was from east to west, therefore we suggested that we should remove some tin-sheets on the west side. Our hope was that the wind blowing from east would take itself the boiler dust. And it worked. So we removed west side sheets from all boiler buildings. The atmosphere there is now so clean that the workers even have their meals in the building! We also solved the problem of light. Enough sun-light filters in, therefore we do not have to use electric bulbs.

There was no facility to store spare machine parts and equipments in our plant. It used to just lie scattered on the floor. In case of any failure, the operation staff would start running around. They would trip over the machine part lying around causing injury to them. We discussed this problem in our quality circle. Laxmanji Thakor, Ram Prasad, Suthar and other workers suggested that these parts should be properly stacked, for this we needed stacks and cabinets. Each plant has lot of scrap material which is of no use to the factory. We decided to build the stacks using this scrap material. We did not have persuaded anyone nor did we need to take permission from superiors. We worked on this task during the recess time. Instead of going to the canteen we would

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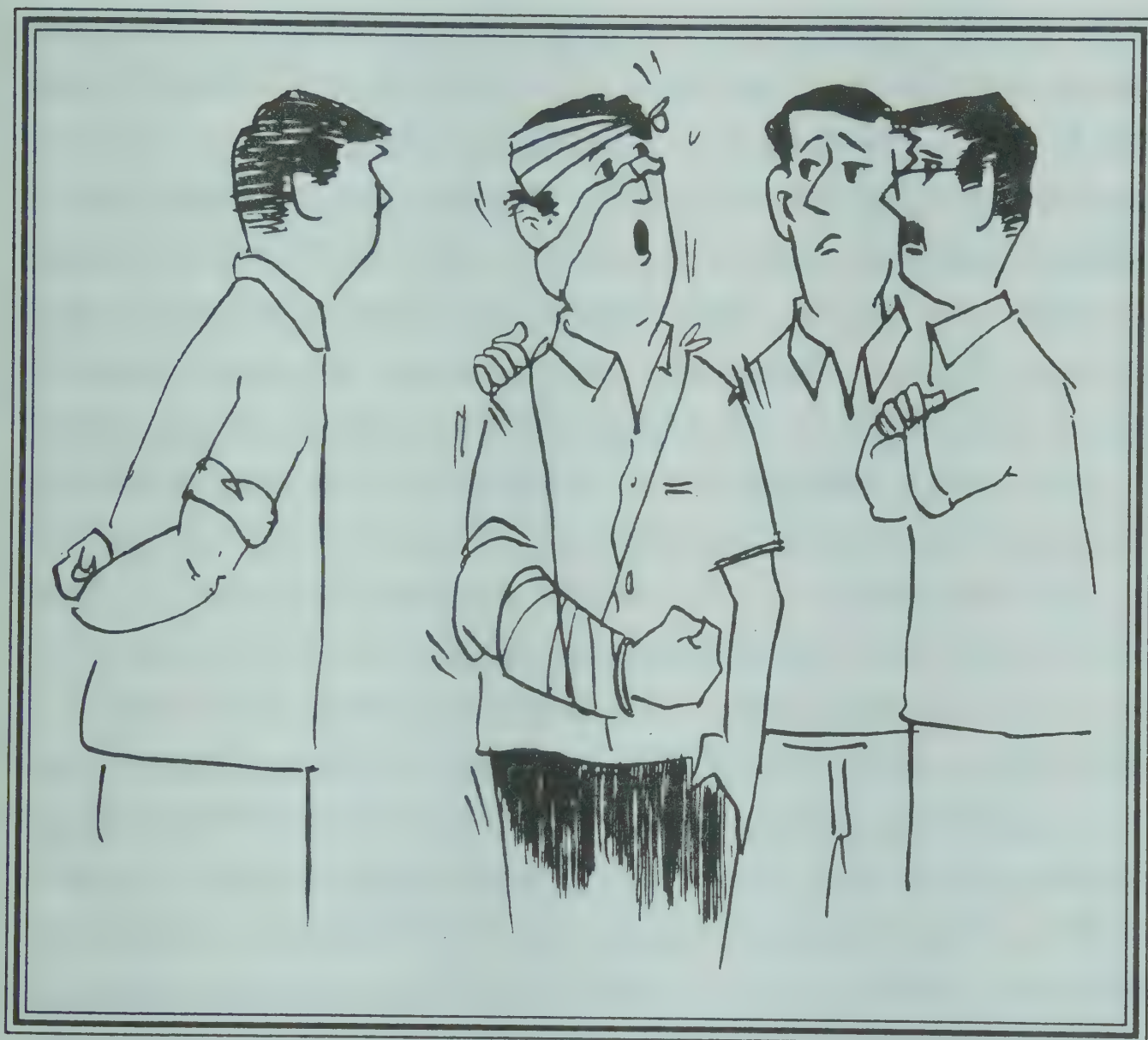


get our tea to the plant. All of us worked together. Each one contributed their skills. Stacks were ready and we put all the spare parts and equipments in them. Now we could maintain proper stacks and more importantly we knew exactly where the parts that we needed were stored. Many of our problems were solved, even the sweeper could clean the plant with much more ease.

In the same manner we started solving problems. During one of our meetings some one mentioned the problems of gauge glass. The tube which is used to measure the water levels in the boiler is called the gauge glass. This unit weighs 55 kg. In case of repairs we had to remove it from the boiler and bring it down. Naturally, this glass use to be very hot. So we had to use cloth and rags to hold it and bring it down. We could not grip it properly due to the rags. One of our workers suggested a slight change in the design by placing handles on the both sides of the gauge glass. Our problem was solved we could remove and replace it very fast and without any danger.

We could notice that there were many accidents due to the safety valves. This was one task which caused us lot of discomfort. Every time the joints start leaking we would have to place a packing and fill up the gap. But there was very little space in which we had to squeeze ourselves and do the repairs. There was not even enough space to work with our equipments so

the breakdowns were frequent. Every time we had a shutdown it was due to this leakage. Our quality circle studied this problem and the space which was of 12-14 inches earlier was increased to 36 inches. Now we could work with which more ease as the problem was solved.



One day we had a very bad accident. Our friend R.V. Suthar was working on the Great Auto chain. Suddenly it snapped and fell on his shoulder. The shoulder was ripped apart and he was rushed to the civil hospital. 16 stitches were needed. We were really worried. If he had been working within the boiler when the chain

broke down, his body would have been cut into small pieces. This chain is made from 121 great bars. Great bars is made from casting, weight upto 17 to 18 kilos. Added to this would be the weight of link, pin, split pin, taking the total weight upto 4 to 4.5 tonnes. There were a total 32 chains of this type, at least one would breakdown every week. Once it breaks down it falls into the hopper. Until it is removed from the hopper we have to shut down the boiler. 10-15 workers would be needed for this job. Three chain pulleys were required to bring it out. Suthar's accident opened our eyes. We discussed this problem in our quality circle. Someone suggested that we should place a lock on it. But the most practical suggestion was that we should weld a pipe below the chain so in case of a breakdown the chain would fall on to the pipe instead of falling in the hopper. We experimented this on one boiler. On the same day we had a breakdown. As expected the chain fell on the pipe. Instead of the earlier 10-15 workers just one worker went up, changed the link and hauled up the chain. It was so easy! We welded pipes in every boiler. After this we have not had a single accident. Repairs which used to take 16-17 hours now take up only a few. Therefore now we produce more electricity, but the workers have lost their earnings from overtime!

Meanwhile, the Managing Director came to know about our quality circle. He was very happy and praised us. He promised to provide us with a special

budget for quality circle. He also insisted that such quality circles should be started in every department. But this gesture of his had a very undesirable effect. The middle level management thought that this is an attack on them, their status, job and importance was on stake! In some others departments the management started to 'enforce the order of the M.D'. They started to use pressure on the workers to start quality circles, whereas the workers were not interested. Workers felt that they were being forced to do thing which they did not want to do and they did not respond positively. Meanwhile our union had put forward some demands before the management. The progress was unsatisfactory as management was not really keen on negotiations. On the other hand, the quality circles were being given a special budget and encouragement. So, the union also felt that their position and influence is being threatened.

A worker who was a member of the quality circle was getting a lot of respect from the management, while a union office bearer did not get the treatment that they deserve; so there was an incentive for workers to join the quality circle. But this was a threat to our unity. We cannot allow our unity to be threatened. Therefore we stopped the activities of the quality circle until the negotiations were over. In our task some officers like Shri Ramdan, U.M. Bhatt and V.D. gave us full cooperation.

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